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MEETINGS
PUBLICATIONS
ADVOCACY
PRESS ROOM
ABOUT



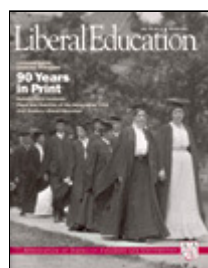
# Association of American Colleges and Universities

LIBERAL EDUCATION

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**Liberal Education, Winter 2004****Looking Forward: Liberal Education in the 21st Century***By Bobby Fong*

W. B. Yeats envisioned history as cyclical, a series of gyres, or spirals, marked by the reworking of enduring tropes. As an example, for him epochs were demarcated by "violent annunciation," whether Leda's rape by Zeus, the shadowing of Mary by the Spirit of God, or the rough beast of the Second Coming that "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born."

In reviewing the concerns that led to the founding of the Association of American Colleges in 1915, I was struck by how contemporary they are. The great fear was that the growth and success of public institutions, with their focus on vocational preparation and specialized knowledge, would work to the detriment of liberal education. Leaders of church-related institutions worried about the place of faith in the academy amid the larger concern that education of character for citizenship and service was giving way to career preparation. The founders sought to establish a national forum for higher education, as opposed to regional interests, but they could only dimly perceive how the academy would be shaped by the democratization of higher education. Writing in a new century, I see how these concerns have evolved over the past nine decades, but also how they remain characteristic of the questions that still occupy the Association of American Colleges and Universities today. Perhaps that should not be surprising, for if at the heart of liberal education is the rehearsal of the human condition, then the questions we ask, even of our purpose as a higher education association, should be perennial ones.

**Liberal and professional education**

What should be the relationship between liberal education and professional education? In the first decades of the last century, these tended to be regarded as divergent models. Liberal arts college curricula were still largely based on courses taken in common: As late as the 1960s, Hamilton College had a universal rhetoric requirement for all first-year students, each of whom made a public declamation in chapel to the entire freshman class assembled. By contrast, while the value of liberal learning was not lost on public institutions, it was embodied at those institutions in general education requirements, generally taken in the first two years of matriculation, before students turned to practical studies. Over time, the growth of specialized knowledge strengthened the importance of the major, and from the mid-century on, higher education was generally characterized, even at liberal arts colleges, by recurrent adjustments between the proportion of graduation requirements given to general education and that increasingly given to the major.

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[Subject Index](#)

Thus, the common curriculum of a St. John's College is now considered unusual, not for everyone, a far cry from the days in which common curricula were widespread attempts to represent the learning required of any educated man.

If the curricula of liberal arts colleges retain a distinctive characteristic today, it is in the relative paucity of professional majors. The national liberal arts colleges award at least half of their degrees in the liberal arts: Students study economics, not business; the sciences, not engineering. Professional preparation is to be reserved for post-baccalaureate study. But such colleges are a small minority. The majority of baccalaureate colleges, in common with master's and doctoral universities, award more than half of their degrees in professional studies. If we accept the conventional wisdom that liberal education and professional education are antipodes, then the fears of the founders of this Association were justified: Professional education has become predominant. The progress of our Association, however, has superseded this conventional distinction.

### **A new integration**

In a changing world where 30 percent of our graduates may eventually work at jobs that do not yet exist, training for a specific career is insufficient as preparation for lifetime employment. Professional advancement is predicated on the capacity to change in response to new situations and challenges, to re-create oneself over time. This realization has engendered renewed appreciation for liberal education, where studies were intended to form lifelong learners. However, rather than understanding liberal education as simply designating traditional subject matter areas such as the humanities and the sciences, AAC&U has gone further. In the Association's 2002 report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, "liberal education" is used to refer to certain learning outcomes. Liberal learning is no longer relegated to general education: It denominates any study that inculcates the abilities to communicate effectively; think knowledgeably, insightfully, and critically; work cooperatively; and behave ethically and responsibly. The operative concern is how any subject, any major or professional program, can be taught liberally.

This has been a monumental conceptual and pedagogical move. It calls for the infusion of liberal education into professional studies, and it spotlights the importance of curricular coherence if liberal learning and professional education are to be integrated. Butler University has five colleges, a college of liberal arts and sciences together with schools of education, performing arts, business, and pharmacy and health sciences. All students, regardless of college, have traditionally fulfilled requirements taken within a general education core curriculum. Recently, however, discussions have begun with regard to how the business and pharmacy curricula could be revamped to integrate liberal study in order to better prepare graduates for their professions. *Greater Expectations* has catalyzed similar discussions around the country at institutions ranging from research universities to community colleges. The integration of liberal studies and professional education, not their divergence, is the new shape of this trope for our century.

### **Habits of the heart**

Hitherto, I have discussed the reshaping of liberal education to develop habits of mind needed to support lifelong learning for careers. That is an important but not sufficient rationale for the contemporaneity of liberal study. The founders of the Association in 1915 had feared that career preparation would supplant a traditional aim of college: the formation of character for citizenship and service to society. By the closing decades of the last century, their fear seemed well-founded. Colleges had rejected the practice of in *loco parentis*; the central purpose of the university was generally avowed to be the discovery and transmission of knowledge; matters of religion, morality, and ethics were considered inappropriate for the classroom, smacking of indoctrination rather than intellectual inquiry. Higher education's purpose was to train the mind; character formation was a concern of the family, the church, the courts, but not the academy.

There were good reasons for this renunciation. Too often religion had been an opponent of scientific progress and rational inquiry. The education of a gentleman was predicated on class and gender distinctions. God and country had been invoked to spur the slaughter of millions in a series of world wars. Morality, supposedly rooted in timeless truths about human nature, turned out to be parochial, culture-bound, and selective in its charity.

In retrospect, however, this wholesale renunciation has now come to be regarded as an abdication of responsibility to our students and our communities. Students need to be equipped for living in a world where moral decisions must be made. And in living, and in choosing, character counts. How one earns a living should be an extension of the values that inform one's life, and there inevitably will be continuity between personal values and how one engages with society. Character is formed by neglect as well as by cultivation, and the academy has had to reassess its refusal to help students grapple with moral imperatives.

This turn has been made possible intellectually by a new humility regarding the limits of empiricism and rationality. The empirical method explores the "how" of things, but not the "why." Rationality may chart cause and effect, but it does not exhaust meaning. Epistemologists have suggested that what and how we know are premised on assumptions of what we imagine our world and ourselves to be. There is no value-free inquiry because values necessarily underlie inquiry.

A key insight of cultural studies is that we cannot be human in general: We inevitably express our humanity in particular, culturally mediated ways. Language is a quintessential human capacity, but no one speaks "language"; one speaks English, or Chinese, or Swahili. So too it is with human values, wherein the very definitions of "justice" or "love" are culturally mediated. There can be no unitary moral orthodoxy, but there are universal longings to make a world more just, more tolerant, more compassionate, more inclusive than the one we have inherited. The challenge to the academy is to find ways to speak authoritatively and constructively to issues of citizenship, service, leadership, and character without imposing a single model of morality.

The postmodern university is poised to accept that challenge. Given a more humble, more nuanced, and culturally sensitive approach to ways of knowing, there is place once again in the academy for exploration of ethics, for case studies of decision-making behavior from literature to business. There is place once again for inquiry into religion and spirituality. There is place to engender not only habits of the mind, but also, in Tocqueville's famous phrase, habits of the heart, which will enable students not only to make a living but also to make lives that are personally fulfilling precisely because they are implicated in the well-being of others.

As with the integration of liberal education into professional studies, inquiry into ethics, religion, and spirituality cannot simply be segregated into certain courses in a general education requirement. It must be infused into the curriculum. Moreover, service learning and volunteerism, issues of leadership and citizenship, necessarily extend beyond the classroom and beyond the campus. There is an experiential component here that encompasses co-curricular activities and internships. The important thing, to my mind, is that there is a renewed determination within the academy to address these issues. The founders of the Association in 1915 were right to fret about the potential neglect of issues of faith and character formation. What they did not foresee was an ebb tide reversing its flow.

### **National aspirations and access**

In an address to the first meeting of the Association in 1915, Robert Kelly called for the development of a "national educational consciousness" consonant with his sense of America's ethnic, regional, religious, and political diversity coming together to form a common national destiny. Over the last century, the conditions for such a national educational consciousness certainly have been achieved. In contrast to a time when going to college was an option for only a few, the 2002

executive overview to *Greater Expectations* begins, "The United States is fast approaching universal participation in higher education." It goes on to note that 75 percent of high school graduates get some postsecondary education within two years of receiving their diplomas. The nation has grown more ethnically diverse, but higher education has become a common conduit to flourishing in American life regardless of social origins. It sends a high percentage of its secondary school graduates to higher education; America can aspire to universal participation in higher education.

But this aspiration is troubled on two counts. First, we may have already reached high tide in access to higher education. The growing economic disparity between rich and poor makes college increasingly unaffordable for many. State underwriting of public education keeps tuition low relative to the actual cost of education, but the effect has been less to provide access to the desperately poor than to subsidize college for the middle- and upper-classes, who actually may have the financial capacity to pay more than they do. The recent recession has spurred cutbacks in legislative support to higher education, but rather than a temporary expedient in hard times, there is fear that, going forward, education will no longer be a civic priority for which the public is willing to pay, especially through tax increases. Most ominously, while college-going has increased among high school graduates, the high school dropout rate is worryingly high, especially among the poor and peoples of color who are experiencing the fastest incidence of population growth. Those most in need of the advantages provided by a college education are those increasingly denied access to that opportunity by lack of prior academic preparation and by lack of ability to pay. It would be disingenuous to boast about universal participation in higher education if America is creating a permanent underclass that cannot even complete high school.

Second, there is concern over the shifting shape of higher education in the years to come. Increased access has been made possible by the proliferation of educational opportunities, in particular the growth of online and for-profit entities. What this means for educational quality, however, is uncertain. For-profit enterprises are not uniformly certified by accrediting associations, but rather than pursuing such accreditation, they are seeking federal legislation to mandate the acceptance of transfer credits earned through their courses. The needs of non-traditional age learners and those who cannot afford to stop out from jobs to be full-time students have led to a different pattern of working toward a degree: the accumulation of credits through sporadic attendance at multiple institutions as well as through taking courses online. This has resulted in efforts to create a national clearinghouse for student transcripts so that credits can be tracked more easily. The cumulative effect, however, may be to equate education with certification for careers, where what is charted is mastery of subject matter, not liberal education. We have been down this road before, and what threatens is another cycle in the tension between vocational preparation and liberal learning.

### **Threats to coherence**

In the earlier discussion, I identified coherence in the curriculum as an essential characteristic of the integration of liberal and professional education, and of education for citizenship and service. Our Association has long argued that liberal education is not achieved by taking any number of classes, but rather by intentionally patterning courses of study that link and synthesize ways of knowing and doing. Perhaps the most important triumph of AAC&U in the last century has been in convincing the academy that aggregating credits does not an education make. Our conferences and activities have been designed to foster institutional efforts toward curricular coherence. I fear, however, that the portability of credits necessitated by nomadic learners threatens such coherence.

The educational path of a nomadic learner is not, by definition, marked by continuity within an institution. What coherence there is in such an education must be constructed by the learner. One might argue that this is a natural extension of students taking responsibility for their own learning. Unfortunately, this overlooks a fundamental dimension of education: that learners be exposed to, even confronted

with, topics and methods which they never imagined had relevance to their lives. Longitudinal studies of liberal arts college graduates repeatedly show that recent alumni most highly prize study in the major, but that as graduates are further removed from their undergraduate experience, it is liberal learning that becomes more esteemed. A customer-based, cafeteria approach to curricular coherence, I believe, does not bode well for liberal education because that is not what will be sought.

*Greater Expectations* rightly extols liberal learning as essential to the development of democratic leadership. Ironically, however, the democratization of higher education may threaten the coherence of the very education in which our Association calls for liberal education to be embedded. I fear that nomadic learners, and the bureaucratic processes and technological innovations that make their education possible, may re-create the divide between vocational education and liberal learning. I fear that a nomadic learner's eschewing of a long-term affiliation with a learning community may fatally impede opportunities to educate for character, citizenship, service, and leadership. When no one ever knows the learners, can the learners ever be challenged to know themselves?

Liberal education will persist and even flourish for full-time students, particularly at residually based institutions marked by intentional coherence within the curriculum and beyond, encompassing co-curricular life and experiential learning. But the parallel development of programs and services to accommodate the peripatetic needs of the nomadic learner may not be fertile soil for liberal learning. In the name of democratizing higher education, then, we may be perpetuating two tracks: a careerist track for the nomadic learner and a liberal education for the elite, those prosperous enough to afford or fortunate enough to earn scholarships to attend college full-time.

### **A challenge**

The challenge to us as educators individually and as an Association collectively is whether we believe that liberal education should be as universal as we have presumed that higher education is becoming. Going forward, liberal education and higher education may decidedly not be the same thing. If the American public insists on the primacy of career preparation, public higher education, tied to public subsidy, may not be able to answer the ambitious call for curricular coherence in liberal learning that this Association has issued. The private sector may answer affirmatively, if it wills to do so, but would the Association then revert to what it originally was established to be in 1915, a social solidarity of higher education institutions not under state control? This is one chasm, that between private and public education's commitment to liberal education, most of us had presumed, at least within the auspices of AAC&U, had been closed.

Although Yeats believed that history was cyclical, he did not believe it to be static. The gyres of history spiral onward, and although we revolve back to a similar point in our circling, we can see how the present moment is not the same as, but superimposed upon an analogous moment in the past. That, at least, is a sort of progress. Liberal learning, I have said, is the rehearsal of perennial questions, not that they are irresolvable, but that resolutions are local and, like theology, must be reworked for our time, our circumstances, and our needs. We can learn and have benefited from the wisdom of those who came before us, and it is because of their fears, hopes, and achievements that what we face in this new century seems so familiar. As T. S. Eliot wrote, "And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time."

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***Bobby Fong*** is president of Butler University.

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